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ABSTRACT

The philosophical debate about making high fliers out of low academic achievers in places considered educationally and culturally deprived like rural Appalachia warms the hearts of those who see education as the road to economic well-being for the nation. However, education reform rhetoric must be saleable to rural residents who distrust outsiders with big plans for making "deprived" people want to be "middle class." Changing rural schools means changing the community and its culture. This paper briefly reviews the history of education reform and resulting school consolidation in West Virginia since the early 1980s, and discusses local realities and responses in rural areas, particularly Braxton County, West Virginia. The discussion focuses on local opposition to state and national initiatives that pull scarce funding away from locally perceived needs, the interrelationships of rural schools and their communities, beliefs that education either prepares youth to leave their community or is irrelevant to their future, educational and occupational aspirations of Braxton County youth, attitudes toward community of West Virginia youth, and technological possibilities for rural school improvement. Contains 12 references. (SV)

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REALITIES OF RURAL SCHOOL REFORM

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REALITIES OF RURAL SCHOOL REFORM

The philosophical debate about making high fliers out of students who are low academic achievers in places considered educationally and culturally deprived like rural Appalachia warms the hearts of those who see education as the road to economic well-being for the nation. The education reform rhetoric from afar, however, must be saleable from the local courthouse steps and school auditorium to rural residents who distrust outsiders with big plans for making "deprived" people want to be "middle class." Changing schools means changing the community and its culture. Change is not new in rural Appalachia, but the road to education reform is bumpy and curved.

All 55 counties in West Virginia are Appalachian counties. It is the second most rural state in the nation, with almost 64 percent of the population residing in rural areas, but does not fit the traditional stereotype where rural means farming. The Economic Research Service of the United States Department of Agriculture identifies no county in the state with agriculture as its primary industry--meaning farming contributes a weighted average of 20 percent or more of the total labor and proprietor income.

The state is rebounding from economic realities of the 1980s, as it lost eight percent of the total population and over 20 percent of the population 18 years of age and less. Tourism replaced coal mining as the state's largest industry, as the economy transitioned to more service-oriented jobs. High unemployment and the need to revitalize the economy of most local communities--meaning increase the ability to compete in a global economy--has driven major educational reform. The state's population has begun to increase as many native residents who left in the 1980s now return to communities that have noticeably changed.

School Consolidation and Education Reform

School consolidation has been the most visible and controversial education change in Braxton County, West Virginia. In the fall of 1950 when one author (Kenna Seal) entered first grade in a two-room school at Cedar Creek, there were over 100 schools situated throughout the county. Forty-five years later only eight schools remain to serve the 2,700 students who live in Braxton County, a county with all 12,998 residents classified as rural by the 1990 Census. Like 23 others of the 55 county school districts in West Virginia, Braxton County has only one high school. The new county high school was a result of consolidation efforts 25 years ago. And the consolidation efforts continue.

Equal access to educational opportunities in many economically depressed Appalachian communities of the state often translates into school consolidation. Declining student enrollment, coupled with a dwindling tax base provides the fiscal incentive to taxpayers for school closures and the merging of schools. School leaders who are held accountable for financing as well as educational access and outcomes, are expected to endorse and lead reform efforts to build larger schools with more course offerings.

School consolidation in West Virginia received a major push from a court case in 1982, which became known as the Recht decision. In his opinion stating that the method of financing all aspects of public education was unconstitutional, Judge Recht strongly suggested that consolidation could prevent the state from wasting money on an outdated school system. Recht wrote that every consideration about education flows from a common denominator--money.[1]

In Spring 1988, the West Virginia Legislature passed 22 education-related bills, including a 173-page omnibus education reform bill enacted to upgrade the quality of education in the state. While welcoming the increased attention to education, several county school superintendents argued that statewide reform must consider the uniqueness of sparse, rural school districts in the state. Leaders in the Legislature maintained that all of West Virginia was rural and that districts shared the same problems.

County superintendents, however, insisted that major differences existed among the school districts, even if West Virginia was perceived as a "rural" state. Perception was fact, as the state ranked second among the states regarding the percentage of population living in a rural area. Several of the superintendents' concerns were supported in a 1988 study, prepared for the Appalachian Regional Commission as the first major report in the nation that assessed the consequences of school reform in small, rural schools, entitled "Education Reform in Rural Appalachia 1982-1987."[2] Among the overall conclusions of the study was that the rural school environment was unique and future reforms must account for special circumstances confronting rural students, teachers, and administrators.

In December 1988, the state superintendent of schools established a special task force on rural school districts and charged members with the responsibility to determine the unique needs of rural school districts in the state. Both of the authors served on the task force. One author (Harmon) chaired the task force at the request of the state superintendent of schools. The task force presented its report at the February 1989 meeting of the state board of education. Next-day headlines in the capitol city newspaper, the *Charleston Daily Mail*,[3] read: "Rural School Report Shocks State Board." The report revealed that recently passed legislation to reform the educational system was having or would have a devastating effect on the rural school districts in the state. The report also revealed a child in a sparsely populated county of the state:

- Will begin the day with a fairly long bus ride
- Is likely to be from a poor family
- Is more likely to have parents who are unemployed
- Is more likely to receive special education services
- Is less likely to be classified as gifted
- Is more likely to have parents who did not graduate from high school
- Has a greater chance of becoming a high school dropout[4]

For the most part, concerns fell on deaf ears as economic realities and the creation in 1989 of a School Building Authority by the West Virginia Legislature to address the estimated

$1.5 billion of school facility needs in the state provided further incentive for local school consolidation. During the first year of the School Building Authority (SBA), many counties chose to consolidate schools as a means of making more effective use of available monies for facilities. Economics of scale achieved by many counties in most of the SBA projects far exceeded expectations of the legislature. No two counties, however, chose to join together to cross crounty (school district) lines and combine schools--more evidence that local control of schools is a prized possession in rural areas.[5]

In the 1987-88 school year, five of the state's school districts were in a financial deficit at the end of the fiscal year, compared to 16 districts in the 1993-94 school year. Over the same 6-year period, the number of schools decreased from 1,101 to 901, or approximately 18 percent. The number of teachers decreased 8 percent, principals 15 percent, and central office administrators decreased almost 19 percent. Maintenance and service personnel decreased by almost 22 percent. Student net enrollment over the 6-year period declined 20 percent. Downsizing of the state's school system is one reality of education reform legislation in West Virginia, as are construction of 45 new schools and renovations totally almost $500 million, higher teacher pay, creation of local school improvement councils, and an emphasis on higher expectations for all students and the "basics."[6]

West Virginia's long heralded Recht decision that caused the financing of schools to be changed is again in the courts for litigation. The new suit, filed in January 1995, charges that the West Virginia Department of Education has not effectively pursued implementation of the Master Plan developed for the state's school system and accepted by the Circuit Court in March 1983. The Lincoln County mother of school-aged children who originally filed the lawsuit in 1974 now wishes to be removed from the suit because she believes it causes school consolidation.

Local Reality and Reaction

The need for constant educational reform is heralded by national and state policymakers, but viewed dimly by local residents. Past reform efforts in the name of global economy, expanded state mandates, diversified curricula, or higher expectations are little understood or appreciated by local elected leaders who mirror public sentiment. State educational initiatives have generally been unaccompanied with adequate funding, causing school consolidation, higher taxes, and loss of local control. Most parents rue the reality that their elected school board member has virtually no control of an educational system that has been prescribed by others through legislation, bargaining, state policies, and judicial precedent.

Some parents see the school as the avenue for their children to have a better life. Parents believe schools can prepare their children best in small, isolated, protected schools that concentrate on fundamental teachings. They believe schools should be strict, orderly, and practice corporal punishment (which was banned by the Legislature in 1994). Most parents, undaunted by Supreme Court decisions to the contrary, also believe schools should be Godly places that practice prayer, avoid the teaching of evolution, and foster religious beliefs.

Some community leaders in rural Appalachia view their school experiences as the "glory days" similar to the Bruce Springsteen song of the same name. Steeped in a tradition of preserving local superiority and self-righteousness, the aging and elderly citizens fondly remember the past that was a more rewarding part of their life. Most parents think their education was superb and believe their children should enjoy the same experience. They want the past improved upon or supplemented, but not changed. They prefer their children to attend the same school, have the same teachers and enjoy the same success they feel they have achieved. And perhaps they should.

Many so-called "innovations" being championed today were born of necessity long ago in the rural schoolhouse. Among these are cooperative learning, multigrade classrooms, intimate links between school and community, interdisciplinary studies, peer tutoring, block scheduling, the community as the focus of study, older students teaching younger ones, site-based management, and close relationships between teachers and students.[8]

A mythology exists, however, in which schools are better remembered than actually experienced. For the most part, parents and citizens accept their own circumstances without trying to blame the educational system for their stations in life. They are much quicker to blame outsiders for trying to bring urban America's problems to rural areas, such as landfills for urban waste or prisons for urban criminals. They also view with great suspicions outsiders who promise rural folks can be more or have more, if they embrace the opportunities of change--and are willing to move.

The state motto, "Mountaineers Are Always Free" describes fully the unencumbered attitude of many residents who live in rural Braxton County. Many of their friends, family and classmates have taken another flight to freedom either up I-77 to Ohio, over I-68 to Virginia, or down I-77 to the Carolinas or Florida in search of employment. To some residents, including a few of those who returned unsuccessful in their search for employment in other states, or longed for the hills back home, freedom means the ability to choose a traditional life-style without pressure from government. A pickup truck with accessories such as guns, dogs and 4-wheelers immortalize the mountaineer spirit in modern times.

Despite nationwide recognition that educational reform efforts are working to produce better student achievement, many rural taxpayers fail to make the connection between higher taxes and better schools and better jobs. Many believe their property taxes and sales taxes have increased needlessly. The local taxpayer doesn't see "A Nation At Risk"--only his or her own livelihood being at risk from rising taxes and fees. Standards for student achievement and school accreditation that evolved from national and state concerns are not the priority local concerns. A winning football team or a shorter bus ride for students would be more realistic locally-derived standards. The standards of excellence vary among schools and cause local school administrators and teachers to be in constant debate about how to meet state goals while simultaneously addressing local concerns, traditions and values.

Local citizens have watched the increase in school funding being channeled into areas that advance state interests. Teacher salaries, employee benefits, and state financed consolidated schools would not be approved for increased funding if a local vote was taken. Fewer teachers available for instruction because of legislated downsizing amidst rising property taxes puzzles parents and local residents. Rural residents have watched educational dollars become redirected toward state goals rather than locally perceived needs. Using lottery funds to put computer networks in elementary schools, however, is probably a locally acceptable utilization of non-tax dollars. Other unfunded state and national initiatives are less understood and appreciated when local resources are being shifted to comply with laws. Most rural residents do not wholly support the premise that nothing was happening in local schools until education was put on the national agenda.

An increasingly complex set of issues and priorities from national, state and local levels has created a school culture that is difficult to penetrate or change. The politicization of school issues, from every presidential hopeful through state governmental candidates to aspiring local office holders, has made both local school officials and the rural citizens clutch their eroding scarce resources. Such state and national initiatives have caused a resistive, oppositional culture to arise. Debate in the U.S. Congress over the uncertain future of the Goals 2000: Educate America Act and national goals, as well as other federal initiatives such as school-to-work will likely increase local resistance to well-intended national initiatives.

Local education leaders and policymakers feel the pressure through public accountability and state mandates to expect all students to achieve at high levels and meet appropriate standards. But they also quickly point out the realities of living and working in rural America. Rural schools in Appalachia exhibit several characteristics that set them apart from other schools and may influence the ways in which statewide reforms affect schools, students and their rural communities. Among these characteristics are:

- Rural schools are more influenced by the economic and cultural outlooks of their communities than other schools
- Rural schools reflect and shape the economic and social stratification of their communities
- Rural schools embody pride in values, including discipline and hard work
- Rural schools serve as more than just classrooms; they are the cultural and social centers of small towns and rural life
- Rural schools are often the major link between the community and the wider world[9]

Rural school districts must implement educational reform in the context of scarcity. The customary characteristics of small scale, isolation, and sparsity are difficult to overcome. As the authors of the report "Education Reform in Rural Appalachia" point out, rural schools in Appalachia face fiscal scarcity from poverty, a weak tax base, and insufficient state and federal aid. The scarcity of human resources in small, rural schools districts involves a small administrative and community leadership base, a restricted pool of qualified instructional personnel and, often, the lack of a "critical mass" of students and teachers for certain course

offerings. The authors reveal what we perceive to be a major barier to improving student achievement and school success:

> Perhaps the most profound scarcity in some rural communities is one of hope for economic renewal, rooted in the lack of concrete economic rewards for academic achievement. In some communities, the lack of a clear and compelling link between education and economic opportunity erodes the motivation of students and challenges the schools as they attempt to improve student performance and reduce dropout rates.[10]

Education and Work

Industrialization created by the railroads, coal mining, gas well production, and timbering industries has peaked and declined in Braxton County. The population has also peaked and dropped to one-third the original number. Post-industrial rural Appalachia has left a core of social and economic survivors that are skeptical of promises of educational reform leading to prosperity. Student aspiring to technical and higher education pursuits have typically needed to leave the area to find employment. The 1990 U. S. Census found 2.7 million people born in West Virginia, but 1.3 million no longer live in the state. School reform efforts that seek to encourage collegiate degrees translate into a loss of intellectual property from the area. Jobs in the local area afford a level of subsistence that shows 63 percent of students eligible for free or reduced meals at school.

Many parents understand that their children may need to leave the county to find employment. The future high-tech, high-skill jobs for which schools are encouraged to prepare students with world-class standards and credentials are not readily visible on the rural landscape. To benefit from the world-class training requires an exodus to urban areas and a loss of regenerating human capital. Moreover, many long-term residents learned the best local job search strategy was based on who you know, not what you know. The changing workplace causes a difficult challenge for local educational leaders. While educators hear they are to prepare students for high-skill, high-wage jobs, neither educators nor residents see such jobs in the local community or understand the required educational preparation.

In 1983 when "A Nation At Risk" called education reformers into action, including business and industry, West Virginia led the nation in unemployment, with a statewide average unemployment of 18 percent. The state has had the nation's highest annual unemployment rate for most years since 1980. Efforts by the current governor's administration have improved employment opportunities over the last six years. The type of jobs has changed, however, as has who are getting the jobs. Most of the new jobs have been service jobs. Moreover, 97 percent of the net job growth has been filled by women, a drastic change in a previous economy that was mostly blue collar male oriented--resulting in West Virginia having the lowest percentage of women working outside the home.[11]

In Braxton County, high paying jobs in traditional coal mining and railway transportation have given way to minimum wage service jobs. Unemployment, currently reported by the state at 15 percent but believed to be at least twice this amount by most county residents, coupled with a weak local economy causes poverty that places many students at risk of not completing school. No single industry or business enterprise stands ready to recruit high school, vo-tech, or college graduates. Opportunities for entrepreneurship are limited due to the unavailability of capital and the predicted marginal earnings in a sparsely populated, low-wage area. By necessity, schooling for the most must prepare students to live and work in some different community.

Encouraging and preparing students to continue their education at a postsecondary institution or college is a major strategy of the school system to place students on a path that will help them be successful in life. Annual college tours, job fairs, college financial aid workshops, free testing for college entrance test, and offering college courses on the high school campus are but a few of the activities to accomplish the goal of increasing the postsecondary/college-going rate. Yet, such a strategy reinforces long held beliefs that the educational system prepares the "best and brightest" youth to leave the local community.

Local educational leaders, including area college recruiters are particularly interested in students enrolling in college who come from families who never advanced beyond a high school diploma. The assumption is that untapped human resources can be developed in these individuals who show academic promise. A college education raises individual and family expectations for future generations and breaks a cycle of poverty that has plagued Appalachian culture. Economic developers maintain that such educational aspirations and attainment by local residents create the human capital needed to attract outside business and industry to the area.

Although many local residents and parents, particularly those victimized by the changing economy, are beginning to see a need for education beyond high school, most view their life's work as a job, not a career. A history of manual labor jobs that seldom rewarded academic achievement in school shadows efforts to advocate workers for the new economy (and global competitiveness) must be flexible and plan to change jobs many times during their career. The area's blue collar workers typically associate careers with college educated, managerial workers; these also are perceived to be the anti-union folks that are contributing to people losing their good high paying with benefits, with hope only to become fully employed in a much lower-paying service job with little or no benefits.

The dignity of hard work has a long tradition in rural areas, much like the strong patriotic, pro-military veteran attitudes common in the area. After all, the first real job opportunity for most males after high school, or if they quit school, was the military. The fact that the military now wants only high school graduates is in itself another attitudinal change for many long-term residents, and encouragement for teachers who seek ways to motivate students to learn at a high level and meet standards.

Aspirations of rural youth in Braxton County and the state seem much aligned with the finding of a national study regarding vocational and education aspirations of rural high school students.[12] Rural youth value their jobs more and their academics less than urban and suburban

youth. They also place lower value on making lots of money, but value friendships more. They see themselves less often in higher level positions, and more often in lower level, less skilled areas. Said another way, the rural youth of Braxton County see for themselves what others around them have experienced, few job opportunities and reward for high academic achievement unless you choose to live elsewhere and become a part of the urban problem in America.

To keep rural youth, local leaders may need to understand their needs more clearly. Preliminary results of a collaborative rural student scholar initiative of the West Virginia Department of Education, the West Virginia Rural Development Council, and the Appalachia Educational Laboratory reveal perceptions of youth regarding communities. Students at the 1994 West Virginia Governor's Academy were asked to rate their needs for living in an "ideal community." The top 10 needs are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Here

The students also indicated how satisfied they were with their own community. The students responded most satisfied or very satisfied to community characteristics of "near to friends" and "nearby forest" and open land for activities like hunting, fishing, and other outdoor sports. The students were most dissatisfied with activities and places for teenagers to safely interact; availability of good paying jobs; chances to get ahead socially, professionally, or financially; range of places for fun and relaxation; extensive indoor entertainment (like movies, bowling, arcades); and help for the unemployed to find jobs.

Like their parents who have stayed in the rural area, perhaps they too recognize and accept the limitations and find ways to enjoy the quality of life amenities. Out-migration data for the county and sate, however, suggest these young people must break ties with family, friends, and the naturalistic lifestyle for "greener pastures" in the streets of urban American if they aspire "to be more" or "to have more." And the rural school must now provide educational opportunities for these students to compete and succeed in the new environment. They must "do more with less," be "thorough and efficient," and seek ways to transform a culture and community in search of economic revitalization.

Hope on the Horizon

As rural school districts struggle with issues of accountability and responsibility dictated by a pressing national agenda to improve schools, a ray of hope emerges with advant of technology literacy among a new generation of students. Every student in grades kindergarten through four now has access to computers and courseware as each school pursues state-adopted instructional goals and objectives for all students to become computer literate. A state proficiency and warranty program also encourages students to master basic academic skills. Bell Atlantic has committed to connect schools cost-free to their service area (90 percent of the state) to the World Schools (Internet) initiative on high capacity lines that also connect very school to computers and databases in the state.

Schools in isolated rural areas can emerge as learning communities and telecommuting villages. Future mergers of schools will not be as common as consolidation of all programs and services for access by students, their families, and the entire community. Technology and information age databases will not only connect the school with the community, but will also link the rural school with a global network of information and resources.

Understanding the realities and potential of rural school reform may mean that some day our students will not need to leave the rural area to find work. And living the good life in a rural community will exemplify how residents think globally but act locally as caring neighbors.

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Table 1
Top 10 Needs of An Ideal Community as
Perceived by West Virginia Governor's Honors Academy Students

Rank	Need	Mean Rating*	Number of Students Respondents
1	Clean and healthy living environment (like litter control, good drinking water, pollution control)	4.91	158
2	Top quality schools	4.90	155
3	Availability of good paying jobs	4.75	158
4	Local government that keeps order	4.69	157
5	Activities and places for teenagers to safely interact	4.66	158
6	High quality community/area hospital	4.65	158
7	Effective police force	4.65	156
8	Range of places for fun and relaxation	4.61	158
9	Opportunities for self-improvement	4.46	158
10	Judges who are tough on criminals	4.45	157

*NOTE: Rating scale was 1 = Don't Care, 2 = Not Necessary, 3 - Don't Know, 4 = Somewhat Needed, 5 = Definitely Must Be There.